A

SERMON

Preached before the HONOURABLE

HOUSE of COMMONS,

ON

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY XXX, 1771.

Jovis, 31° Die Januarii, 1771.

ORDERED,

THAT the Thanks of this Houſe be given to the Reverend Mr. *King*, Chaplain to this Houſe, for the Sermon by him preached Yeſterday, before this Houſe, at *St. Margaret's*, *Weſtminſter*; and that he be deſired to print the ſame.

J. HATSELL,
Cl. Dom. Com.

16

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BY

JAMES KING, M.A.

CHAPLAIN to the Honourable HOUSE of COMMONS.

LONDON:

Printed by J. and H. HUGHS, near Lincoln's-Inn-Fields;

And Sold by J. WILKIE, in St. Paul's Church-yard; T. PAYNE, near the Mews-Gate; and J. WALTER, at Charing-Cross.

MDCCLXXI.

ROMANS xiii. 5.

WHEREFORE YE MUST NEEDS BE SUBJECT, NOT ONLY FOR WRATH, BUT ALSO FOR CONSCIENCE SAKE.

EVERY thing that can eſſentially intereſt or concern mankind, muſt fall under the conſideration either of Religion or Government. For if we conſider men in their true light, as beings having an intereſt beyond this world, and at the ſame time as creatures adapted to ſociety, and deſigned to promote each others happineſs in this life; then all their actions muſt be referred to one or other of theſe principles, and rank under the Religious or Political.

In this diſcourſe, I intend to confine myſelf to the conſideration of man in the latter of theſe views, as formed for Society and Civil Government. I underſtand Government in the largeſt extent of the word, and ſhall enquire how far it has a Divine ſanction, and how far obedience and ſubmiſſion to it is a religious duty. It was for the purpoſe of inculcating this general doctrine, I am willing to hope, that this day's ſolemnity was inſtituted; that it was deſigned to eſtabliſh civil authority upon ſuch a foundation as is moſt likely to ſecure to it a general obedience, and not in any degree to deſcend to the conſideration of political views or party intereſts.

Taking this to be the ſpirit of this day's ſolemnity, I ſhall endeavour to fix this principle on its own natural unchangeable foundation.

I will therefore firſt examine upon what the abſolute ſovereignty of God himſelf is founded; and then endeavour to ſhew how this applies to human authority, ſo as to make it an object of religious ſanction.

And this, I think, will fairly lead us to the grounds and obliga-

obligations of civil government. For if the *Powers that be, are ordained of God,* without doubt, they muſt bear ſome analogy to that perfect truth and reaſon on which his own authority reſts; and which qualify him for being the all-wiſe and all-juſt governor of the univerſe. And in this light, we can no more refuſe our obedience to them in a limited degree, than to God abſolutely and implicitly.

It is one way of accounting for God's abſolute right to our homage and obedience, to ſay that he made and created us. This is conformable to the received notion of acquiring property among men; and ſo far as it goes it is ſolid. However, ſince it pleaſed God not only to create man, but likewiſe to endue him with certain faculties; he muſt govern him according to theſe faculties. For inſtance, he hath given us reaſon, which, however perverted, yet upon the whole enables us to ſee the difference between right and wrong, truth and falſehood. Therefore it is no impiety to ſay, that was he to give us commandments which were unreaſonable and unfit, it would be unfit and unreaſonable for us to obey them. He hath implanted in us a deſire of happineſs,

and an abhorrence of pain and misery: should he therefore command us to perform such duties as have a direct and natural tendency to make us finally unhappy; we should not, because in effect we could not, obey him. It would be to suppose that nature talked one language, and its author another; and upon such a supposition no reason could be assigned why men likewise might not, if they thought fit, enjoin by statutes the contrary practices to what they now do; ordain wrong instead of right; and, as the Scripture expresseth it, *establish iniquity by a law*. But things are not so: it is not merely the obligation of a law that makes a command good and fit to be obeyed. In matters indifferent, indeed, this is a sufficient ground for obedience; but the wisdom and goodness of the things enjoined is the foundation of all good laws; the end of which are, that men might by law and authority be compelled to do that, which, if there had been no law at all, it would have been for their interest and happiness to perform. "Good and evil, therefore, are "prior to all laws, and which they cannot alter." And it is the proper province of all laws to keep clear and visible this great line of distinction, and to aid and secure it by sufficient restraints from evil, and incitements to good.

It

It is for this purpoſe, that *magiſtrates bear the ſword:* they ought not to give its edge a wrong direction, no more than they ought to *bear it in vain.*

God hath made us intelligent, free, accountable agents; and hath endued us with capacities, by which we cannot but apprehend and acknowledge the eſſential difference betwixt moral good and evil, with the ſame degree of conviction that we ſee the natural difference betwixt light and darkneſs. His abſolute dominion therefore, reſts not upon a right to our obedience from creation merely: For infinite power, abſtractedly conſidered, could only fill us with a ſlaviſh fear and dread of offending; which is a very imperfect inducement to obedience, when unaccompanied with the vital principles of love and gratitude. A rational ſubmiſſion can only be ſecured by a nice and due temperament of all his perfections collectively conſidered; for did he want any one excellence which the human mind can poſſibly conceive, or had he them in any circumſcribed degree, in every ſuch inſtance, we ſhould experience the want of ſome motive or other to make the obedience compleat.

Let

Let us now ſee how this applies to civil power and authority; by which we ſhall find how far obedience to the civil power is a religious duty.

Wherever God is ſuppoſed to give power, we muſt likewiſe conclude, that he, for the greater part, joins to it ſome proportion of his other perfections: for power, divine or human, would have a terrible operation, without a due mixture of juſtice, wiſdom, and goodneſs. Not that we are to require perfection in our governors, as a condition neceſſary to our obedience. It muſt be ſuch wiſdom and ſuch juſtice only, as we have a right to expect in the ordinary courſe of nature from beings full of frailty and imperfection. All governors, whether (as in our country) appointed by peculiar deſignation in certain families, or by election of the people, muſt be conſidered as men of like paſſions and infirmities with ourſelves. The people are bound in conſcience to bear their miſtakes and weakneſſes as long as they are bearable; they are to take care, that they do not miſtake the inconvenient for the intolerable. And the reaſon is as evident, as the duty is cogent. Government muſt be adminiſtered by men.

Men

Men muſt be imperfect. To pull down government for ſuch imperfection, is in effect to renounce all ſorts of civil inſtitution. This renunciation would be the unqueſtioned right and privilege, perhaps the duty of all who are placed in ſubjection, if they themſelves poſſeſſed that perfection of reaſon, and that abſolute moderation of paſſion, which their governors wanted. But ſuch is the wiſe conſtitution of Almighty God, that frail men ſhould be ruled by men of like frailty; and therefore it is his will, that rulers and ſubjects ſhould bear each others burthens; that in *unity of ſpirit, and in the bond of peace,* in true ſocial affection and brotherly charity, they ſhould heartily unite their endeavours for leſſening the inconveniencies, the miſeries and vices of this mortal life; and not, like adverſe parties who have different views and intereſts, contend with each other, the one to give authority the moſt unlimited ſtretch, the other to circumſcribe obedience within the narroweſt limits; nor try how far each may approach to the confines of exceſs without falling into it; leſt violence and oppreſſion ſhould enſue on the one hand, or ſedition and rebellion on the other: leſt the people, by indulging their ſpleen and reſentment againſt their governors,

and the governors by deſpiſing the feelings of the people, ſhould inſenſibly proceed to ſuch lengths, as to put it out of the power of either to proceed with innocence, or to retreat with ſafety.

My buſineſs is not in this place to define the legal authority of magiſtrates, or the privileges of ſubjects; but ſolely to inculcate the duties that they reciprocally owe to each other. Whatever the rights of magiſtrates may be, they will find it very hard to exert them, if they ſhew no regard to the rights of the people. However their authority may bear the image and ſuperſcription of Heaven, it will have little currency, if it be not compoſed of the genuine metal, and is not of ſtandard weight in the *balance of the ſanctuary*.

Subjects too, and the moſt free and independent ſubjects, if they are deficient in that obedience, which aids and encourages government, and unites it with the people in the bonds of confidence and love, run a great riſk of bringing force and oppreſſion upon themſelves, inſtead of judgment and juſtice. Nothing has a greater tendency to lead governors to the arts and practices of tyranny, than

than a continual fear for their own ſafety, and the experience that they bear rule over a violent, inconſiderate, and unſteady people. Thus diſobedience to government does but too often defeat its own end; and aggravate that oppreſſion which it pretends to remove. Obedience then becomes not only our duty, in the relation of ſubjects to magiſtrates; but our intereſt, merely as men conſulting our own happineſs.

As natives of this country, and living at this time, we have great reaſon to be thankful to God that this duty is not in any degree ſo burthenſome to us, as it muſt have been, at even the moſt deſirable periods of our hiſtory, to our forefathers; or, at this day, to many of our neighbours. We enjoy a conſtitution of government, to which, without exaggeration, and I hope too without profaneneſs, we may ſay, the *obedience is perfect freedom*. We ſee likewiſe, in the higheſt ſituation of authority, virtues correſpondent to that ſituation; and an example of that reverence to the laws, the obedience to which it is the purpoſe of his authority to enforce upon his people.

If then it is the will of God that there ſhould be government, and that government, without obedience, is a contradiction; obedience to government is obedience to the will of God, and a religious duty in the ſtricteſt ſenſe.

I flatter myſelf it is not neceſſary, at this time of day, to remind my hearers, that this doctrine encroaches not at all upon their lawful rights and liberties: God forbid! The rights of mankind are too well underſtood to need explanation, or to bear contradiction. Our government is conſtituted, in a great meaſure, for the very purpoſe of preſerving them; and by ſo doing, provides the ſtrongeſt of all human motives to the obedience of the ſubject. A diſpoſition to lawleſs diſturbances would tend to put all again to the riſk; and to ſhake that ſecurity which has been provided with ſuch inceſſant labours, and ſuch conſummate wiſdom.

The ſolemnity of this day is a great and ſerious leſſon to the people. Whilſt the errors of government in the days of KING CHARLES THE FIRST were attempted to be corrected in a peaceable and legal manner, God gave a ſignal bleſſing to the endeavours of our forefathers: The

conſtitution was improved and preſerved; we had a king and a parliament; we had law and liberty; we had a church, and a church reformed. But when thoſe bounds were once paſſed; when the ancient landmarks of the conſtitution were removed, and force was introduced as the reformer in church and ſtate; we loſt our king and parliament; we loſt our laws, our liberties, and our church: and by paying no regard to rational and goſpel principles of obedience, *uſing liberty as a cloak of maliciouſneſs*, *ſpeaking evil of dignities*, and *reſiſting*, by every violence, *the ordinance of God*; we fell at laſt, after paſſing through all the various miſeries of anarchy, into the moſt harſh and diſhonourable ſervitude under which any nation ever groaned, and from which we were delivered in a manner unhoped for, and indeed, little leſs than miraculous.

I ſhall conclude by reminding you, that if the nature and obligation of civil obedience be in any degree enforced as a religious duty, that a religious temper of mind, both on the part of the governors and governed, will beſt ſecure ſucceſs to government, and render its operations ſalutary and efficacious. Notwithſtanding the excellency of our conſtitution, all the bleſſings and wholeſome effects of good government will be found to depend

upon the meaſure of virtue and true piety that is kept up among us. I wiſh all that is amiſs at preſent might not be traced up to a decay of theſe principles: And when they are totally extinct, ſad experience will ſoon make us ſenſible of the weakneſs of all human reſtraints, and how faintly all other conſiderations operate, without their aſſiſtance.

It is generally the courſe with thoſe who have pernicious deſigns againſt the public, to begin by leſſening the obligations of religion, and the reſpect that is due to ſacred eſtabliſhments, and then to turn the ſame engines againſt the ſtate. Wherever the attack is made, the ſame principles are at the bottom; and ſuch as are backward to *render unto God the things that are God's*, will take the firſt opportunity of refuſing to *render unto Cæſar the things that are Cæſar's*.

The effects, that a contempt for religion and the honour of God has upon ſociety, may not ſhew themſelves immediately; but let us be aſſured they have a direct natural tendency to bring as fatal, and as ſure (though perhaps not ſo quick) deſtruction upon it, as a downright

oppoſition

oppoſition to all authority. " Whatever the civil magiſtrate " is obliged to puniſh as crimes, and which in the end " prove too ſtrong for him, take their riſe and grow up " among the people as vices." Hence too it is, that the more perfect and improved the polity, the ſtronger will appear the neceſſity of calling to its aid the religious principle : For as the arts of life are moſt improved, and carried to the greateſt height, in the moſt perfect and flouriſhing polities; as riches, luxury, elegance, and profuſion are increaſed, in the ſame proportion muſt be increaſed the imaginary wants of thoſe who live in that community: In proportion to the increaſe of our wants, will be the violence of our appetites, and our eagerneſs to indulge them: And, in proportion to the violence of our appetites, the weakneſs of human reſtraint. What then is to be done? Laws muſt be multiplied: This may do the buſineſs for the preſent; but it is like the application of ſome medicines, which relieve and ſave the patient for a time, but reach not the true cauſe of the diſorder.—Unleſs the principles of virtue and piety are ſown in our youth: except immorality and profaneneſs are diſcountenanced, and *baniſhed from high places*, and thoſe to whom it more immediately belongs, and who have it

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moſt in their power, ſet themſelves in good earneſt about weeding out vice and irreligion, what have we to look for but a terrible harveſt of diſorder, anarchy, and confuſion?

Since many therefore who hear me have it ſignally in their power to promote the cauſe of virtue and piety, and whoſe inclination cannot be doubted, I will conclude with offering to your conſideration a particular or two for this purpoſe.

And firſt, I muſt recommend that you would by your example encourage a proper reſpect to religious inſtitutions in general, and to the public worſhip of Almighty God in particular. Many whoſe lives and characters are in other reſpects irreproachable, do not conſider (and would be ſorry if they knew) of what bad effects upon the morals of ſociety, an inattention to theſe duties muſt neceſſarily be productive. For if the minds of the people are once accuſtomed to neglect or think lightly of them, the ſtrongeſt hold upon their virtue is weakened; and every link in the whole chain both of religious and civil obligations will break one after another.

The

The laſt particular, to which I ſhall beg the favour of your attention, is, that you would not give way to a falſe delicacy, too common in the preſent age, I mean a want of true courage, when proper occaſions offer, of ſtanding up in the defence of injured virtue and piety againſt the ſcoffs and raillery of libertines. Many there are of real piety, and ſincere believers, I doubt not, who nevertheleſs in this reſpect fall into a ſeeming compliance with the corrupt taſte of the times. Such will give me leave to put them in mind of the awful words our bleſſed Saviour uſed upon this occaſion: *Whoever ſhall be aſhamed of me and of my words, in this adulterous and ſinful generation; of him alſo ſhall the Son of Man be aſhamed, when he cometh in the glory of his Father, with the Holy Angels.* In times of public difficulty and danger, we can no way ſo effectually procure God's favour and protection, as by each of us endeavouring in our proper ſtation, to extend his kingdom, and promote the honour of his name here on earth. And certainly we cannot leave to poſterity a more valuable legacy, than a diſpoſition to order, virtue and piety, which an attention to theſe good works cannot fail laying the foundation of. Our country calls for our beſt

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endeavours; and we cannot begin better than by making an alliance with God. *Happy is that people that hath the Lord for their God!* The effects of the pious labours of good and great men (with God's bleſſing) will ſoon ſhew themſelves, by opening to us a brighter proſpect, neither diſturbed by inteſtine commotions, nor clouded with threatnings from abroad. *Judgment will ſoon run down as waters; and righteouſneſs like a mighty ſtream. Mercy and truth ſhall meet together; righteouſneſs and peace ſhall kiſs each other: yea the Lord will give us that which is good; and God, even our own God, ſhall give us his bleſſing.*

FINIS.